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ABSTRACT

This publication outlines prerequisites for success, critical factors in achieving excellence, and strategies for sustaining excellence once high levels of performance have been achieved. It considers how quality and improvement models might be used to support colleges in this work and draws on the work of 10 colleges in the United Kingdom that have maintained excellence in both inspection grades and student success rate. (These conclusions from the study of high performing colleges are made: sustaining excellence is not the same as reaching excellence, and sustaining excellence makes particular demands on colleges. These factors are prerequisites for achieving excellence: leadership, vision, and putting students at the heart of everything. These factors enable excellence to be achieved: high quality staff, clarity about core business, sound quality assurance, management information and communication strategies. These factors enable colleges to sustain their position: maintaining staff motivation, renewal and change, and a culture of continuous improvement. The external environment was viewed as a source of opportunities and resources in addition to a source of pressure or threat.) The document outlines frameworks and models for excellence and improvement, using such standards as Investors in People and the Excellence Framework. The publication concludes with a capability audit that summarizes factors identified by colleges that enable them to achieve excellence. (YLB)

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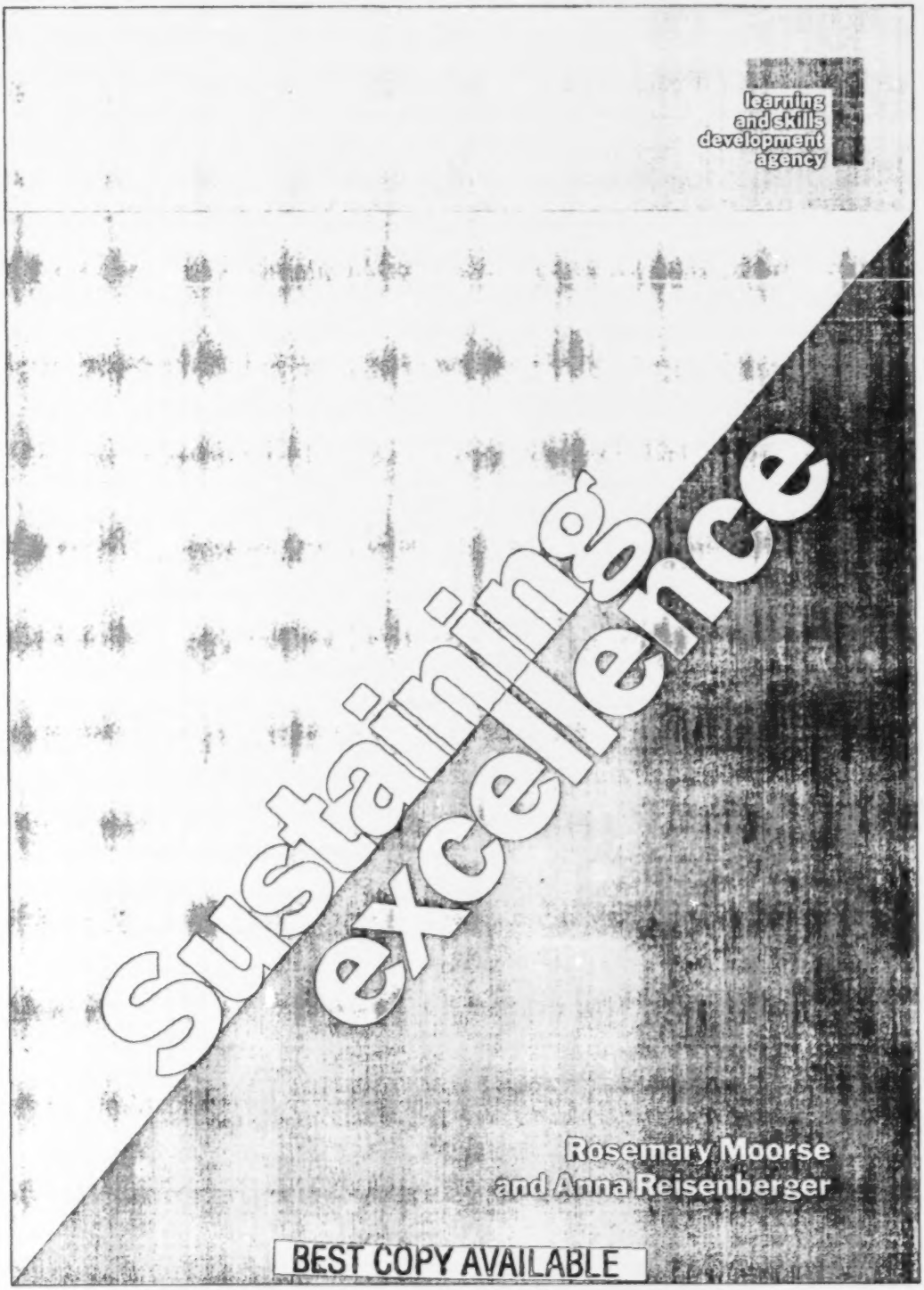

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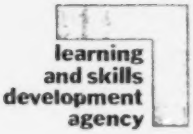

Sustaining excellence

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Note
FEDA is now known as the Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Raising Quality and Achievement Programme
Run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges (AoC).

- We aim to reach all colleges and all levels of staff.
- We offer extra support to colleges that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is sponsored by the DfEE and all activities are subsidised.

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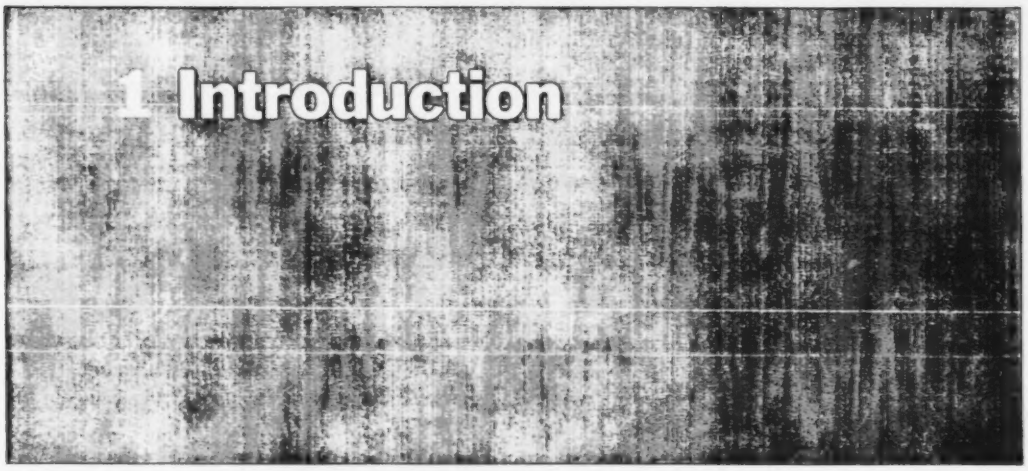

1 Introduction

How can colleges achieve and sustain high levels of performance throughout the institution?

This publication outlines prerequisites for success, critical factors in achieving excellence and strategies for sustaining excellence once high levels of performance have been achieved. It also considers how quality and improvement models might be used to support colleges in this work and draws on the work of ten colleges that have maintained excellence in both inspection grades and student success rates.

The publication is based on a study of colleges but will be of interest to all providers with areas of excellence concerned to maintain the impetus for continuous improvement.

This study of high performing colleges leads us to conclude:

- Sustaining excellence is not the same as reaching excellence; it makes particular demands on colleges.
- It is possible to identify key factors, agreed by curriculum managers and cross-college managers, that need to be addressed.

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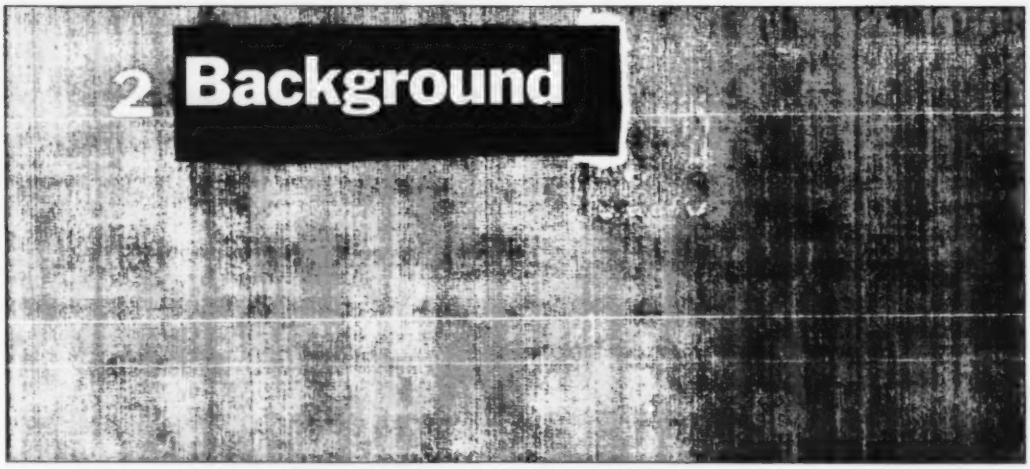
- These factors can be categorised as:
  - prerequisites for achieving excellence: leadership and vision, putting students at the heart of everything
  - factors that enable excellence to be achieved: high quality staff, clarity about core business, sound quality assurance, management information and communication strategies
  - factors that enable colleges to sustain their position: maintaining staff motivation, renewal and change, and a culture of continuous improvement.
- Good cross-college performance contributes to good curriculum performance.



2 Background

During the 1990s the government's drive to raise standards in further education was supported by a range of initiatives to recognise and promote good practice. College accreditation[1] and the award of Beacon status[2] both formally recognised colleges that had achieved excellence as measured by inspection grades and student success in achieving learning goals. Such colleges were able to apply to the FE Standards Fund[3] for up to £50,000 to disseminate good practice. By August 2000, 28 colleges had met the standards required for accreditation and 15 had been awarded Beacon status.

For such colleges the issue is no longer how to attain excellence but how to sustain it. Several of them expressed concern about this, particularly where it might be difficult to measure further improvement.

The shift of responsibility from the Further Education Funding Council to the Learning and Skills Council, together with a new Common Inspection Framework for post-16 providers, now presents colleges with new challenges and different frameworks for identifying excellence.

To explore these issues, the Learning and Skills Development Agency (formerly FEDA) worked with ten colleges with accredited and Beacon status to identify effective strategies for sustaining excellence. All ten had sustained excellence in identified areas between their first and second inspection, although the inspection framework had changed in this period. Four of the colleges presented a case-study report on how they had maintained high standards in cross-college areas such as management, quality and student support, identifying:

3

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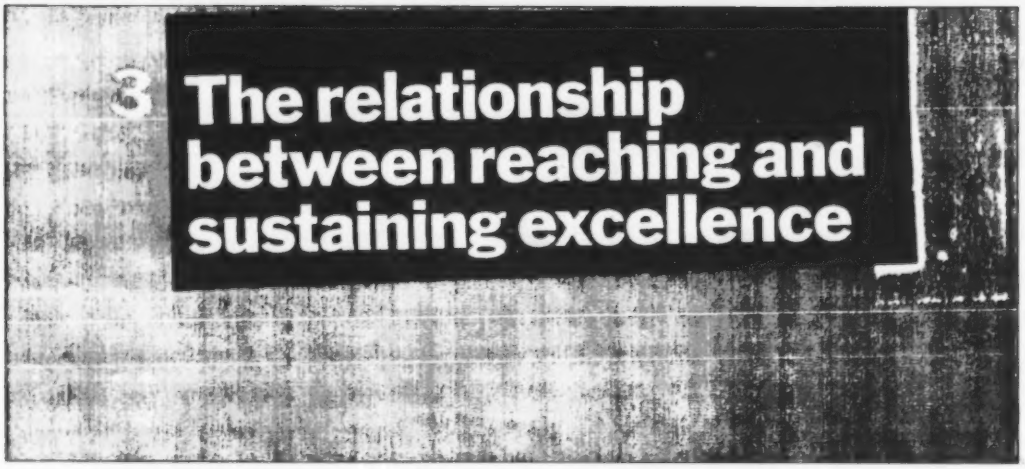
- key factors in reaching and sustaining excellence
- practical strategies they had implemented or were planning to implement to sustain their position
- barriers they had encountered or expected to encounter.

Their insights were challenged and amplified in a seminar with the other five accredited and Beacon colleges. Curriculum managers from the presenting colleges were later interviewed about sustaining excellence and the issues emerging from the seminar. They were also asked to consider whether cross-college factors were critical in enabling curriculum excellence.

College contributions were complemented by desk research on existing models of quality assurance and improvement. College views about their staff were tested for validity against the findings of the Learning and Skills Development Agency benchmarking service on staff satisfaction.

The Agency will be undertaking further research and development work on the proposed 'centres of excellence' in FE colleges.



3 The relationship between reaching and sustaining excellence

Many of the issues raised by project colleges related equally to reaching and sustaining excellence. When asked, however, whether sustaining excellence was different from reaching excellence, in almost all cases the answer was an emphatic 'yes'.

Several colleges acknowledged that although their college might have gained accredited or Beacon status, some aspects of their provision were better than others. For them, the challenge was to raise all aspects to the same high standard. Receiving funding to disseminate good practice had forced them to take a critical look at their practice and decide which areas really were excellent and could be promoted, and which needed to be 'picked up'.

Several colleges identified the danger of complacency, one even admitted that their performance had 'dipped' a bit after their first inspection.

Curriculum managers in two colleges sensed a reluctance to change once an approach had been proved to work. They were conscious that they and their colleagues would need to remain innovative, if they were to maintain their performance. Another curriculum manager felt that while striving to reach excellence there had been a very specific target – achieving a grade 1. Once this had been reached, staff had to create their own target and that could be more difficult.

In only one case did a college see no difference between reaching and sustaining excellence. However, this respondent also pointed to the importance, stressed by all colleges, of not becoming complacent and of being open to challenge. No one suggested that sustaining excellence was easy.

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I was proud to get a grade 1 but knew we still had to improve in some areas.

Don't assume that a good grade at inspection means everything is OK.

People are realists. They know how difficult it is to be excellent in 100% of provision. We need to ensure all aspects are excellent.

Inspection provides the focus for excellence for a lot of FE but a good grade does not necessarily equal excellence.

There is a danger that we become complacent and reluctant to change. If you are on to a winning formula why mess with it?

There is a tendency after inspection to relax but in a sense there is only one way you can go ... down!

There is no difference between reaching and sustaining excellence. Every year is different – there are new students and new demands. If you have that philosophy you treat each year differently.

Colleges identified a range of factors that were important both in reaching and sustaining excellence. These were:

- putting students at the heart of everything
- leadership and vision
- high quality staff
- clarity about core business
- well-developed processes and systems for:
  - quality assurance
  - communication
  - management information
- the ability to respond appropriately to external factors.

For all colleges, the underpinning principle was the need to put students first. This and outstanding leadership appeared to be the prerequisites for success.

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Three key factors could then be distilled as essential to sustaining excellence:

- maintaining staff motivation
- renewal and change: a balance between tried and tested and new developments
- establishing a culture of continuous improvement.

So:

- Good quality staff are a key resource in achieving excellence but maintaining staff motivation is critical in avoiding complacency or stagnation.
- Clarity about core business is important but the ability to respond to new demands and to develop core business appropriately is essential for longer term performance.
- Sound systems, particularly in quality assurance, management information and communication, underpin good performance. Developing a culture of continuous improvement is key in sustaining that position.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the different factors and is shown in greater detail in the Appendix.

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Figure 1 Reaching and sustaining excellence

4 Excellence in practice

4.1 Prerequisites for success

Students at the heart of things

Senior managers and curriculum leaders agreed that putting students at the heart of everything they did was essential to achieving excellence. In practice this meant:

- using benefit to students as a guiding principle for all decision-making and ensuring that all actions and behaviour contribute to the eventual success of students
- balancing support for students with high expectations of them
- actively seeking students' views and representation in a range of ways.

One college went to great lengths to ensure that teaching staff concentrated on students and their learning, rather than becoming caught up in 'extraneous activity'. They used their Standards Fund money to disseminate their good practice by inviting colleagues from other colleges to shadow their staff's daily routine rather than organising formal presentations or workshops.

All the colleges agreed that curriculum managers had a central role in communicating the ethos to teaching staff. Several identified the two most important aspects of their treatment of students as high levels of support and high expectations. One curriculum manager for Art, Design and Creative Studies worked to the following 'bottom-line' beliefs:

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- group size (small for studio work and large for other aspects of the curriculum to balance this)
- student contact with staff (assisting student development through a one-to-one relationship rather than 'packaged' learning or private study)
- student review and assessment (with time allocated so that every student has a body of work assessed by two staff every six weeks).

A programme manager for Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism identified his vision as creating a caring environment in which students could be successful. For him this meant not just caring but high expectations. This clear vision provided the foundation for all his decisions, particularly where there were conflicting pressures.

One curriculum manager stressed the importance of going beyond questionnaires to seek student views by including them in course reviews and course team meetings. Another college has active student representation on the board of governors, all the standing committees and the academic board.

When the work of the quality teams revealed inconsistencies between procedures for work-based and full-time students, one college canvassed the opinions of trainees, before drawing up an action plan to improve provision and ensure parity. Elsewhere student focus groups consisting of course representatives met termly with the head of school (no other staff were present). Students identified specific issues that the college could respond to and be seen to respond to, for example installing bicycle racks in the car park and issuing travel cards at college rather than making students collect them from the bus station.

Some quotations from project colleges:

We forget that reaching and sustaining excellence is about student success – we need to motivate them.

Students are the reason we are here – we serve their needs.

Student success is staff's reward – living proof that everything is worthwhile.

Quality improvement is located with the student. The student experience is what matters.

You can always improve. It's not just about results. You may get less able students one year but in terms of classroom activities and teaching and learning you can always make improvements. You can always look for strategies to help students learn more effectively.

Celebrating student achievement is taken as read.

It's not just about being nice to students. It also means checking up on them.

Students are consulted, encouraged to get away from the 'them and us' mentality and start thinking 'we'.

Leadership and vision

Although leadership and vision were seen as important drivers in achieving excellence there was some uncertainty about how crucial they were in sustaining excellence. This appears to be because principals had energised staff throughout the college to be committed to quality improvement. In effect, they had pursued a strategy of distributing leadership and instilling confidence in other managers.

One college had decided to pursue its application for accreditation just after a change in principal. In another recently accredited college a new principal was about to take up post when the project was undertaken. Both felt positive they could sustain their performance. In the first case the college has been successful in acquiring accredited status.

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Leadership qualities shown by managers included:

- encouraging strong leadership at all levels of management, including governors, with clearly articulated visions and purpose
- the ability to step back and have a view of where the college should be going while remaining in touch with what is happening on the ground
- knowing the constituency and political climate
- having one eye on the future.

Vision is important – it is about what the students can achieve – not getting blown off track. It can be particularly difficult for tutors to step back and get a vision of where they should be going.

> *Vision is important – it needs to be communicated clearly to all new staff who are appointed and kept up front with existing staff.*

The principal sees the overview, staff don't think like that. The same aim is achieved from two different directions.

> *It is easy to get out of touch when promoted and to make decisions that cannot be implemented effectively on the ground. Imposing them autocratically will not work.*

The principal knows the constituency and political climate. He has been around for long time in the area.

> *Principals need to be outside the 'comfort zone' pushing the organisation on.*

Principals need to have one eye on the future – FE is a very dynamic environment. They need to see trends in technology, demography, job opportunities.

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4.2 Reaching excellence

The three factors identified as important in reaching excellence are elaborated below. If we compare them to factors which are identified in the later section as sustaining excellence, we can see that the three listed below are only basic building blocks, or raw material, which need further development and attention if colleges are to sustain their performance.

Quality of staff

Colleges agreed that staff were their key resource and that high quality staff were essential. Identified key attributes or requirements were:

- high level of competence or qualification
  (in one case academic attainment specified as a requirement)
- commitment to the college's vision and purpose
- energy and interest
- willingness to change and develop.

Those who appointed staff had the responsibility to convey clearly the vision and purpose of the college. In one college the principal was present at 90% of appointments. However, opportunities to appoint new staff did not always arise, particularly in colleges with little staff turnover, and other strategies to develop or enhance existing staff were needed.

One college curriculum manager acknowledged that his college's geographical area did not attract new staff or those seeking promotion. They had to 'grow' their own staff by empowering and developing them, and giving them more responsibility.

Another college balanced the experience of their longstanding staff by appointing young, less experienced, part-time practitioners who brought particular specialisms. They also used this as a mechanism for creating an age and gender balance.

Clarity about core business

All colleges emphasised the need for clarity about the nature and delivery of their core objectives. Some highlighted the danger of losing focus or lowering quality through indiscriminate diversification.

Colleges need to:

- maintain the quality of existing provision
- respond selectively to clearly identified new need in the light of the college mission
- be confident that the college can meet that need without sacrificing quality.

One college that had chosen to move into new areas had done so very selectively. It had rejected any further diversification at this stage, for example into HE franchising, choosing instead to develop the quality of existing provision.

Clarity about core business is very important. We have not got obsessed with units, franchises or new business. We are not worried about making money.

There can be a temptation to diversify too far and lose focus. We are now re-focusing on 16–19 year olds. We have other business – business training which is a very focused niche market, and community education evening classes. Our aim is to bring the quality of this up.

We don't make widgets.

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Sound systems and processes

Colleges identified clearly the need for sound systems and self-assessment processes, particularly in quality assurance, communication and management information. These should:

- support the particular aims and needs of the college (rather than simply responding to external demands)
- support and involve staff at all levels in the organisation
- be transparent and open and owned by staff
- avoid bureaucracy.

They also all had well-developed systems for assessing and monitoring performance.

The colleges used a variety of quality models: internal frameworks from the FEFC and the HE Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and quality models such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Excellence. They were also working towards award schemes focusing on staff development, such as Investors in People (IIP) and on customer satisfaction, such as Charter Mark. Rather than allowing these frameworks to become a straitjacket, they stressed the importance of adapting them and integrating them into their overall college systems.

The colleges saw self-assessment as a positive factor in encouraging a self-critical culture. It needed to be accompanied by rigorous monitoring in the form of internal audits and inspections, and verification by staff outside the area being scrutinised. Regular lesson observation was identified as the main contributor to raising the quality of teaching and learning.

All colleges had developed systems to ensure active staff involvement in assuring quality. Examples included:

- course review as a central feature of the QA process
- all staff belonging to a quality team
- 'slice groups' with staff from different levels and disciplines working together on operational issues.

Not surprisingly, colleges saw good information as an essential foundation for credible judgements. In some cases it had taken time for staff to trust and use centrally supplied data and some colleges admitted they still had improvements to make in this area. Staff also needed to recognise their own responsibility in providing and recording data.

One senior manager was adamant that management had a responsibility to provide staff with relevant, responsive and accurate data and to train them in interpreting and using it. They could then legitimately expect staff to own the data and to take responsibility for any strengths or weaknesses it revealed in performance.

Effective communication was also seen as vital, not only in conveying necessary information but in involving, reassuring and motivating staff. There was a strong feeling that information needs to be open and shared – up, down and across the institution.

> *Staff hate secrecy more than anything else. It is very damaging and affects morale, particularly if staff's security is thought to be under threat. Information needs to be public – use e-mail and bulletin boards.*

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4.3 Sustaining excellence

Project participants felt strongly that sustaining excellence was different from reaching excellence. They identified positive actions that can be taken to sustain performance and also negative attitudes and behaviour to avoid.

Staff motivation

One of the strongest messages from project colleges was the need to guard against complacency or stagnation. Continually motivating staff – however competent they may already be – was therefore key. Approaches employed by the project colleges included:

- rewarding excellence
- supporting and developing staff
- valuing staff
- encouraging responsibility with trust
- communicating high expectations.

The challenge is to maintain an appropriate balance between rewarding and supporting staff while continuing to challenge them and have high expectations.

Practical strategies

Recognising and rewarding excellence

Examples ranged from small, personal acts of recognition to quite substantial extra resources. They included:

- sending a personal, handwritten note and chocolates to every member of staff following inspection
- long service awards
- rapid response to allocate additional resources if student targets have been exceeded
- giving staff time for extra duties where promotion was not possible
- giving staff status by publicising the actions of 'junior' staff who have significant responsibilities to make others aware of this

- investment in new buildings and physical resources (which in turn enabled the college to broaden the course offer within this curriculum area)
- investing in a curriculum area and its staff to create a centre of excellence
- staff given their own PC in return for achieving the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)

Feedback, praise and positive comments are important. At the end of the day we're a people business.

Developing and supporting staff

Developing and supporting staff were seen very much as developing the whole person and responding to individual needs rather than narrow preparation for new requirements. Strategies included:

- playing to staff strengths
- targeted mentoring of new or marginally performing staff
- using staff development days to enable staff to pursue professional practice such as, in Art and Design, working towards exhibitions of their own work
- using the staff development budget to enable staff to pursue particular personal interests if the skills can then be used to enhance the curriculum
- job enhancement (not enlargement!) to broaden staff's experience and enrich them
- using appraisal to ask staff how they would like to develop
- minimising bureaucracy and freeing up staff to focus on the core business of teaching and learning.

In one curriculum area staff were expected to identify two other centres outside their own institution they would visit each year.

In one college a member of staff was undertaking an art therapy qualification. On completion she would research the possibility of setting up full-time entry level provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

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Valuing staff, encouraging autonomy with trust, having high expectations and providing challenge
Strategies included:

- listening and responding to staff ideas and criticism
- encouraging staff to come up with new ideas, for example seeking their contributions to the annual business plan
- devolving course and curriculum responsibilities and giving staff ownership of decision-making for their course or area
- setting clear and accepted performance targets for staff
- encouraging staff to set and own targets and consequently to feel pride at achieving them.

One curriculum manager was at pains to point out that staff in her college accepted that a course's success was their individual responsibility and that 'the buck stops here'. In another area the curriculum manager expressed his confidence in his course teams by devolving responsibility: 'Managers do not always know all the issues associated with a course and should trust staff'. In one area the teaching team had agreed with their curriculum manager not to do their appraisals in term time but in the holidays, so that they could concentrate their efforts on students.

The balance between pressure and support
The strategies above demonstrate the mixture of pressure and support that the project colleges exercised. All colleges acknowledged the need to balance these.

One college saw low expectations and over-caring as a potential barrier to sustaining excellence. Developing staff's resilience and 'ability to take knocks' is important and is much more likely to happen when staff feel valued and are confident in their ability.

Fear does not motivate staff. Showing you are interested and care for them does. Then you can put in the high expectations.

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Change and renewal

The importance of clear vision and clarity about core business has already been established. To avoid complacency or stagnation college managers also recognised that they needed to look outwards, to be responsive and ready to change. Colleges saw the balance between stability and responsiveness as very important.

Key issues were:

- looking outside for good practice and new ideas
- not getting 'blown off course'
- developing a 'have a go' mentality
- having a positive but critical response to change.

One way of renewing staff energy was to focus on a new project each year – for example, supporting learning through the use of ILT – that had clear goals and new interest, but contributed to the overall goal of raising quality standards.

Managers emphasised the importance of making well-informed decisions about change even where they were difficult.

> *We look at employment market and trends and make decisions about when to drop provision. We sometimes have to be brutal but if staff are flexible it will be OK.*

The following example demonstrates the importance of letting go the tried and tested.

The college had felt their self-assessment processes were in danger of stagnating after their latest inspection. They decided to discard their traditional self-assessment format based on the inspection framework and allowed a 'freestyle' format:

> *The structure of the SAR [self-assessment report] reflected the college's functions rather than the FEFC's cross-college aspects (e.g. management, etc.). The result has been a self-assessment report that is closely related to the department that originally wrote it, and evaluates all college activities. This strengthens the feeling that it is owned by the staff, rather than externally imposed, and makes it easier to adapt to the new inspection framework.*

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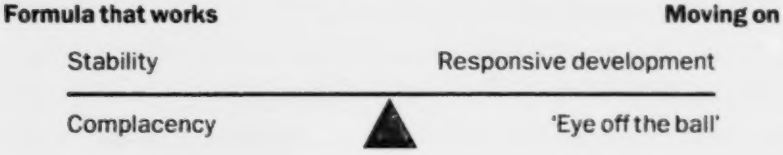
The importance of not being seduced or distracted by new interests was expressed by one manager as a need for 'solidity running through everything – the whole thing and the itsy-bitsy bits'. Figure 2 illustrates the balance between maintaining what works while continuing to develop new ideas and areas of work.

Figure 2 Balancing stability and responsiveness



If the balance is not maintained, stability can turn into complacency; responding to every new requirement, on the other hand, can lead to neglect of core business.

Culture of continuous improvement

All the colleges had moved beyond developing sound QA systems to a self-critical, improvement culture. They identified the following features as helping them not only to sustain but to improve their performance continuously:

- valuing feedback
- bottom-up systems
- owned targets
- high quality data allowing early diagnosis and intervention
- constant review of systems to ensure they are rigorous and reflect changing situations.

Practical strategies used by colleges

Being open to feedback and change

In one area lecturers frequently team teach. They are happy to comment on each other's lessons and to accept critical comments. Staff see the process as an inbuilt improvement mechanism that also allows them to react quickly before things go wrong.

In one college quality teams had noted inconsistencies between procedures for work-based and full-time students. The college appointed a manager for work-based provision who undertook an in-depth review including surveying and canvassing the opinions of trainees, supervisors, employers, placement officers and lecturers. Weaknesses were identified and addressed through an action plan monitored by a steering group.

Successful colleges are open: they demonstrate features typical of 'learning organisations'. In disseminating its good practice through the Standards Fund, one college emphasised that they had learned a great deal from 'weaker' colleges who received their dissemination activities: 'Involvement in dissemination is a two-way street.'

College managers stressed the importance of disseminating good practice internally to bring everyone up to the same high standard; spreading excellence becomes a means of sustaining it.

Use of management data

All colleges stressed the value of good management information in improving quality. Internal data enabled problems to be identified and addressed at an early stage. National benchmarks and trends, and comparing performance with good colleges nearby, enabled them to make decisions on areas to be addressed and learn from practice elsewhere.

One curriculum manager admitted that staff were only just beginning to see the value of the college management information system and to accept that its accuracy was equal to what they put into the system – another example of the importance of staff ownership.

Constant review of systems

All colleges stressed the importance of establishing robust systems in reaching excellence. They were clear, however, that the systems should serve the needs of the organisation and not remain static.

'We keep internal systems under review and make changes – not for sake of it but to improve and to avoid the "tick box" syndrome.'

One college identified the need to make its internal verification systems more rigorous and self-critical. It established a panel of four managers who acted as a 'jury' and responded to internal verifiers' comments. The same college has developed an on-line course review and log which reflect the shift to IT solutions.

Bottom-up systems and ownership

One of the qualities of good leadership is delegating responsibility to encourage ownership of change.

A curriculum manager was adamant about the need for quality to come from below, commenting that although his college had a central quality unit it would have a very negative effect if it were seen to operate autocratically. For him, course teams were at the heart of curriculum quality and he saw it as their responsibility to monitor their results even if these were then published centrally.

Another college emphasised the importance of all teams setting their own performance indicators and targets. In another, the autonomy of college quality circles, looking at different functional areas, was such that senior managers only attended meetings by invitation.

Barriers to sustaining excellence

As well as identifying key factors in sustaining excellence and practical strategies they had employed, project colleges were asked to identify the barriers they faced. These ranged from national policies or pressures to more 'local' issues:

- declining pay and conditions of service relative to the schools sector and the demotivating effect on staff
- coping with constant change without time for consolidation
- prioritising when confronted with multiple demands
- increasingly bureaucratic systems
- a culture that focuses too much on inspection, audit and justification – the 'policing' side of quality – rather than on improvement and development
- the danger of action plans becoming a straitjacket and staff responding to them mechanistically.

However, all the colleges regarded the barriers as more of a challenge than a threat and, while being realistic about the difficulties, worked hard to overcome them.

Bureaucracy is the most difficult aspect when maintaining quality. I'm looking at the shelf in front of me and I can count 63 A4 binders. The vast majority of those are not working documents.

I'd like to see a college where systems are unbureaucratic if it exists!

Having clear priorities is important. We're not always successful in this. Often there are conflicting priorities.

Action plans can be a bit like Stalin's five-year plan. We tick items off and assume they're finished with. For example, I have an objective to improve the tutor system with an action to run a staff development day. Once the day has happened I can tick off the action but it won't necessarily lead to improvement, or improvement may be nebulous and hard to quantify.

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4.4 The external environment

The range of colleges included in the project meant they had very different student groups and missions and worked in very different environments. All agreed, however, that it was important to look outwards and consider external factors as potential opportunities, resources or means of support, rather than assuming them to be threats, unavoidable demands or pressures.

External factors that affected colleges included:

- national initiatives and steers:
  - the advent of the Learning and Skills Council
  - associated funding methodology
  - curriculum change: Curriculum 2000 and information and communications technology
- local partnerships to meet the needs of new groups of learners
- re-organisation and merger in the college or neighbouring providers
- collaboration and partnerships relating to quality:
  - enhancing staff skills through training and industrial experience
  - using external experts (e.g. chief examiner, external verifier) for guidance or audit
  - benchmarking against other colleges and learning from good practice.

The change of inspection regime to the Common Inspection Framework under Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate did not appear to concern the project colleges unduly. They were prepared to adapt existing systems and processes, which already had the needs of the students and the quality of teaching and learning as their main focus.

One college saw the development of new GNVQ units as a positive external pressure in that it reminded staff that the curriculum was not static and they would have constantly to adapt to change.

Networking and establishing 'genuine working partnerships' was critical for one college in targeting work in specific communities to help deliver its mission.

A college facing merger just before inspection had used preparation for inspection as an opportunity to work together with a common purpose and build strong teams across the merged college. Staff had got to know one another and had become confident about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the merged college and what needed to be done to address areas of concern.

Colleges stressed the importance of learning from practice elsewhere. Examples included visiting HE student art exhibitions or GNVQ exhibitions at other colleges; working collaboratively to exchange resources; involvement in national projects; benchmarking against other colleges.

One example shows how these colleges fare in benchmarking exercises. Over the last year the Agency (formerly FEDA) has developed a standard staff satisfaction questionnaire for use by colleges. The questions are grouped under broad headings including how the member of staff completing the questionnaire feels about their position and role in their college; how staff are treated; management style; communication and customer care.

FEDA provides a benchmarking service through which colleges can compare their own responses to each question against responses nationally. For the purposes of this project FEDA compared the overall responses of 811 staff in eight Beacon and accredited colleges that took part in 2000 with over 8,000 staff from 72 other colleges. The findings show statistically significant differences in the levels of satisfaction of staff in excellent colleges in relation to all 38 questions (the demographic profiles of staff were not significantly different), when compared with staff views in the other colleges.

Staff in both groups of colleges gave the same importance ratings, except in response to the statements 'I would recommend the college as a good place to work' and 'the college has a reputation for the quality of its provision' where staff from the excellent colleges gave significantly higher ratings. This confirms that the colleges' reported attention to staff and their development is reflected in the staff's actual commitment to the college.

5 Excellence and improvement

In the spirit of continuous quality improvement several colleges were working towards additional external quality standards including the Business Excellence Model,[4] the Recognition of Quality Award for Managing a Department, the MSQA System with City and Guilds, and the QA2000 System with Edexcel. Investors in People and the Excellence Framework were the most frequently mentioned standards. Even where colleges were not using these particular standards, the practices they report exemplify practice which is seen as an indicator of excellence or effectiveness in other frameworks. Some of the frameworks and models are outlined here for other colleges to consider.

Investors in People

The number of excellent colleges achieving Investors in People demonstrates their recognition that staff is their key resource. Investors in People is a key way to connect strategy and staff development, by developing staff to improve performance. A survey of 200 colleges, of whom 48% of respondents had achieved and 52% were working towards recognition, showed that half of the achievers thought that IiP had improved business performance, compared to 11% of those still working towards it. The achievers also displayed more characteristics of learning organisations (Ashworth 1999).

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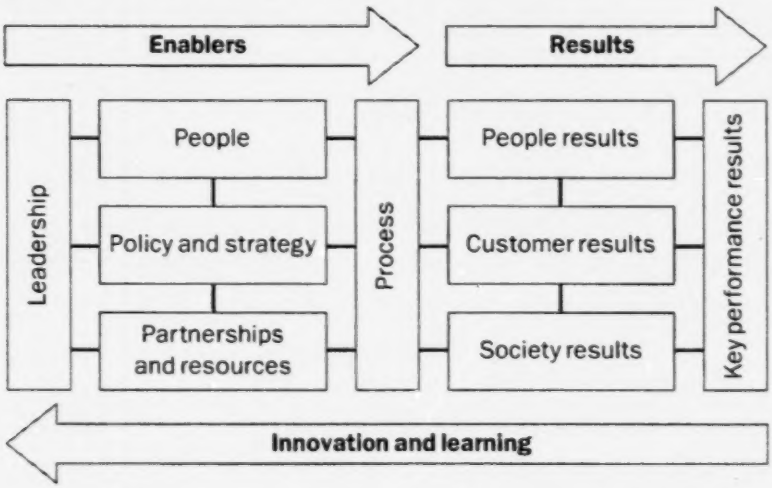
EFQM Excellence model

The Excellence model provides a more comprehensive model, which addresses both the processes and outputs of an organisation to assess its strengths and identify areas for improvement.

Figure 3 EFQM Excellence model



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Leadership Leadership and vision
People High quality staff, motivating staff, students at the centre
Policy and strategy Clarity about core business
Partnership and resources External factors
Processes Culture of continuous improvement

Mapping the 'enablers' against factors which the colleges identified as essential in reaching and sustaining excellence shows considerable overlap.

Hundreds of public and private organisations, but only a few colleges, have used the model for identifying strengths and weaknesses, benchmarking against others and gauging year on year improvement. FEDA's Raising Quality and Achievement Programme has developed a simpler version for colleges, called Learning PROBE (Promoting Business Excellence).

A number of strategies have been introduced by the government through the School Standards Fund to promote excellence, for example Excellence in Cities and Beacon schools, which predate Beacon colleges. Most of the literature on school improvement refers to the more restrained term 'effectiveness', rather than claiming excellence. A review of research over the past two decades has identified a number of key features of successful schools, see Figure 4 on page 30.

Figure 4 Factors for successful schools

Professional leadership	Firm and purposeful A participative approach The leading professional
Shared vision and goals	Unity of purpose Consistency of practice Collegiality and collaboration
A learning environment	An orderly atmosphere An attractive working environment
Concentration on teaching and learning	Maximisation of learning time Academic emphasis Focus on achievement
Purposeful teaching	Efficient organisation Clarity of purpose Structured lessons Adaptive practice
High expectations	High expectations all round Communicating expectations Providing intellectual challenge
Positive reinforcement	Clear and fair discipline Feedback
Monitoring progress	Monitoring pupil performance Evaluating school performance
Pupil rights and responsibilities	Raising pupil self-esteem Positions of responsibility Control of work
A learning organisation	School-based staff development

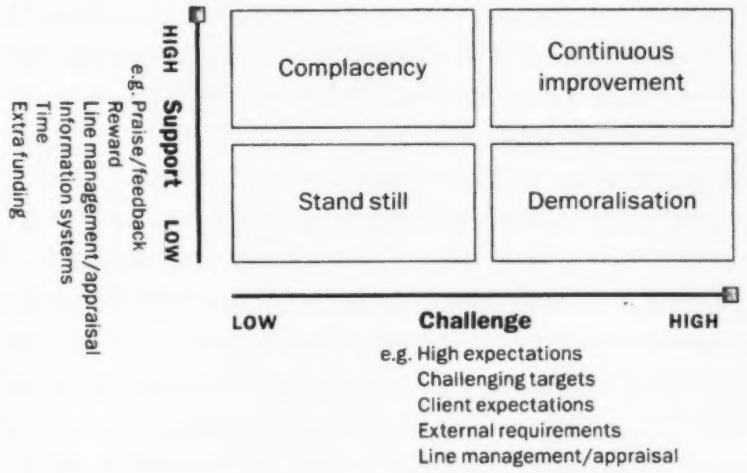
(*Key characteristics of effective schools*, P Sammons, J Hillman, P Mortimore, Institute of Education/Ofsted 1995)

The authors expand these categories by drawing on a range of research studies. They caution against interpreting correlations between characteristics as evidence of a causal relationship, and point out that contextual factors may mean that the lessons are not directly transferable to different sectors. Many of the school research studies, like this college study, only draw on a limited range of case studies. However, it is interesting that a number of the key characteristics and their descriptors are also parallelled in our reports from colleges: professional leadership, vision and goals, high expectations.

The list differs in emphasis from the college factors in its greater emphasis on teaching and learning. The size of colleges, the very varied nature of the curriculum, the diverse backgrounds of the voluntary and mainly part-time student body, and the complex relationships with a variety of external stakeholders, all make the management and support structure of colleges relatively more significant. (This point is also raised in relation to retention and achievement strategies in Martinez 1999.) But the emphasis in excellent colleges on keeping student needs at the heart of any strategy gives a similar message.

Professor Michael Barber, who heads the DfEE Schools Improvement Unit, argues that maintaining and indeed improving excellent performance needs a high degree of both support and challenge (Barber 2000). He has devised a model, which shows the relationship between pressure and support and the effects produced by a balance or imbalance between the two. An adapted version is shown on page 32, with examples of the kind of support and pressures applied in further education. Colleges in this study found it a useful model to clarify how their strategies worked. It can be used to identify college or departmental culture, and the kind of incentives and challenges that will motivate particular groups or staff or learners to improve.

Figure 5 Balancing challenge and support

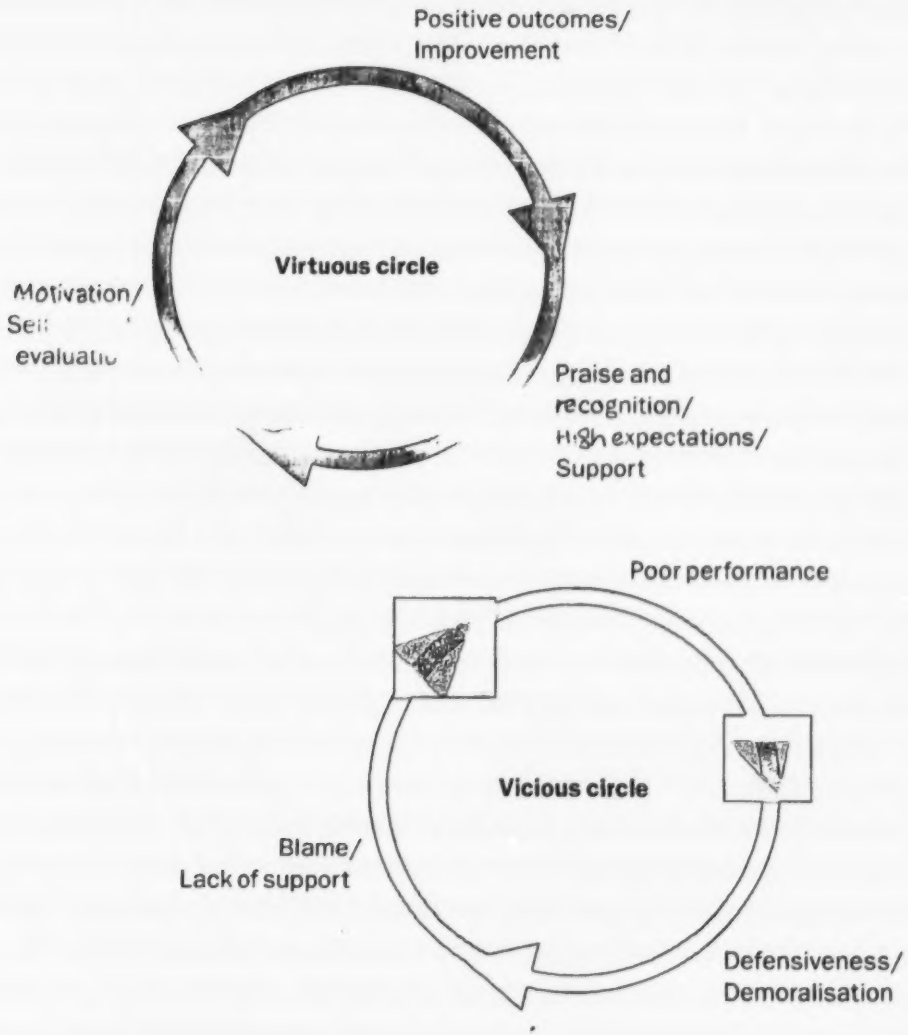


- Where support and pressure are both high this drives continuous improvement.
- Where there is good support but little pressure, complacency results.
- Where pressure is high but support low, staff become demoralised.
- Low pressure and low support together lead to standstill.

The colleges in this study frequently referred to the need to both support and challenge students and staff. Successful colleges have identified strategies that enable them to move into a culture of continuous improvement, but they constantly check whether they are slipping back into complacency.

The relationship could also be expressed as virtuous or vicious circles.

Figure 6 Reinforcing strategies



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It may be that past a certain threshold, strategies which characterise excellent colleges may be mutually reinforcing and help to sustain good performance through a virtuous circle. Conversely, colleges identified as 'causing concern', can experience bad publicity, poor enrolments and demoralised staff, and find it difficult to escape the downward spiral of the vicious circle.

6 Conclusions

The colleges designated as excellent identified a number of factors that enabled them to reach, and subsequently to sustain, excellent inspection grades and levels of student achievement. There is broad agreement between curriculum managers and cross-college managers on what these are and there is evidence that good cross-college performance contributes to good curriculum performance.

The strategies that the colleges identified are backed up by some of the more dynamic quality models that place an emphasis on improving, as well as proving quality. These models can be used as frameworks by colleges wanting to sustain overall excellence as well as those who have achieved excellent performance in one area and want to maintain it while improving in other areas. The 'capability audit' on pages 36–38 summarises the factors identified by colleges in this study and is offered as a starting point in judging your organisation's capacity to sustain excellence.

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Statement of capability

Prerequisites

Students at the heart of things	High ▶ Low
We use 'benefit to students' as a guiding principle for all decision making/actions/behaviour	
We balance support for students with high expectations	
We actively seek students' views and representation in a range of ways	
Overall self-assessment for students at the heart of everything	
Leadership and vision	
There is strong leadership at all levels, including governors	
The college has a clear vision and purpose that is understood by all staff	
The principal/top management knows the college's constituency and political climate	
The principal/top management has a view of where the college should be going in the future	
At the same time they remain in touch with what is happening on the ground	
There is a 'no blame' culture in which good practice can flourish	
Management teams listen and respond to staff, trusting staff expertise	
Overall self-assessment for leadership and vision	

Reaching excellence

Quality of staff	High ▶ Low
There are high levels of competence among staff	
Staff are committed to the college's vision and purpose	
Staff demonstrate energy and interest	
Staff are willing to change and develop	
Overall self-assessment for quality of staff	
Clarity about core business	
There is a clear statement of the college's core business	
New areas of need are clearly justified and in line with the college mission	
The college can meet identified new need and ensure its quality	
The college ensures the quality of existing provision is maintained	
Overall self-assessment for clarity about core business	
Sound systems and processes	
Systems/processes are tailored to support the college's particular aims and needs	
Systems/processes support and involve staff at all levels	
Systems/processes are transparent and open, and owned by staff	
Systems/processes are as unbureaucratic as possible	
Overall self-assessment for systems and processes	

Sustaining excellence

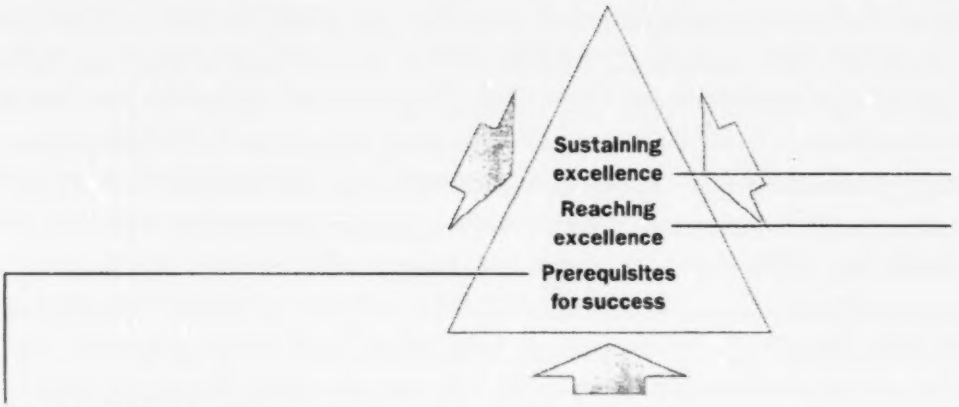
Staff motivation and reward	High ▶ Low
Staff are praised and rewarded for performing well	
There is effective support and development for staff	
Staff feel valued	
Staff are encouraged and trusted to take responsibility	
There are high expectations of staff	
Overall self-assessment for staff motivation and reward	
Renewal and change	
The college is outward-looking and keen to learn from practice elsewhere	
The college responds positively but critically to change	
The college is sufficiently clear in its vision and guiding principles not to be 'blown off course'	
There is a 'have a go' mentality supported from the top	
Overall self-assessment for renewal and change	

Sustaining excellence continued

Continuous improvement	High ▶ Low
Staff at all levels want to improve and value feedback	
There is a bottom-up approach to quality assurance	
Staff set, own and monitor their targets	
Benchmarking data and management information are used pro-actively for early diagnosis of problems and intervention	
QA systems are reviewed regularly to make sure they are workable and remain relevant	
Overall self-assessment for continuous improvement	

Appendix

Reaching and sustaining excellence: the relationship



Prerequisites for success

Leadership and vision

Strong leadership at all levels, including governors
Clearly articulated vision and purpose
Knowledge of the college's constituency and political climate
A view of where the college should be going
In touch with what is happening on the ground
A 'no blame' culture
Trust in staff and responsibility given to staff
Partnership/competition
External economic climate
Re-organisation or merger
Changes to management

Students at the heart of everything

Benefit to students a guiding principle
A balance of support for students and high expectations
Actively seeking students' views and representation

Sustaining excellence

Maintaining staff motivation

Praise and reward
Valuing staff
High expectations
Support and development
Encouragement, trust and autonomy
Developing resilience

Renewal and change

Avoiding complacency or stagnation
Outward-looking and keen to learn from elsewhere
Not 'blown off course'
Positive but critical response to change
'Have a go' mentality

Culture of continuous improvement

Staff at all levels who want to improve and value feedback
Bottom-up approach to quality assurance and improvement
Owned targets
High quality internal and external data
Constant review of systems

Reaching excellence

High quality staff

Highly competent
Energy and interest
Committed to college vision
Willing to change and develop

Clarity about core business

Clear statement of core business
New areas justified and in line with mission
Meets new need while assuring quality of new and existing provision

Sound QA, communication and management information systems and processes

Tailored to college's needs
Transparent, open, owned by staff
Learning and Skills Council
Curriculum change (Curriculum 2000)
Support and involve staff at all levels
Unbureaucratic
Funding
ICT in learning

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Notes

1. Accreditation of colleges was introduced by the FEFC in 1998. With the advent of the Learning and Skills Council and the proposed Common Inspection Framework, future arrangements for accreditation are under discussion.

   To be awarded accredited status colleges currently have to demonstrate to the FEFC that they have established comprehensive, effective and rigorously applied systems of management control and quality assurance covering all aspects of their work in accordance with the following five specified criteria:

   - the existence in the college of formal and effective control, quality assurance and monitoring arrangements
   - regular and rigorous self-assessment, validated during the course of inspection
   - the setting and consistent achievement of appropriate targets for institutional performance

- demonstration that standards of students' achievements are being improved and/or maintained at a high level over a three-year period
- effective action to address weaknesses and demonstrate the college's accountability.

At the time of writing (September 2000), colleges that have been accredited are no longer subject to the full four-yearly inspection but are still visited regularly by college inspectors. Under the original arrangements their record and achievements would be formally reviewed and a report published by the Council every six years. On being awarded accredited status colleges can also receive £50,000 from the Standards Fund to disseminate good practice.

Full details are set out in FEFC Circulars 98/22 *Accrediting colleges* and 98/41 *Applying for accredited status.*

2. Beacon college status was introduced by the government in 1999. Beacon colleges are selected by ministers from colleges that have gained accreditation from the FEFC and/or from colleges that have achieved at least five top grades in a recent FEFC inspection. Beacon colleges can receive £50,000 from the Standards Fund to help them disseminate good practice throughout the college sector.

3. The FEFC Standards Fund was introduced in 1999 to underpin the government's drive to raise standards in the sector and to support colleges in improving quality and sharing good practice. Between 1999 and 2002 £275 million will have been allocated to the fund. Six categories have been identified for funding for colleges in 2000/01:

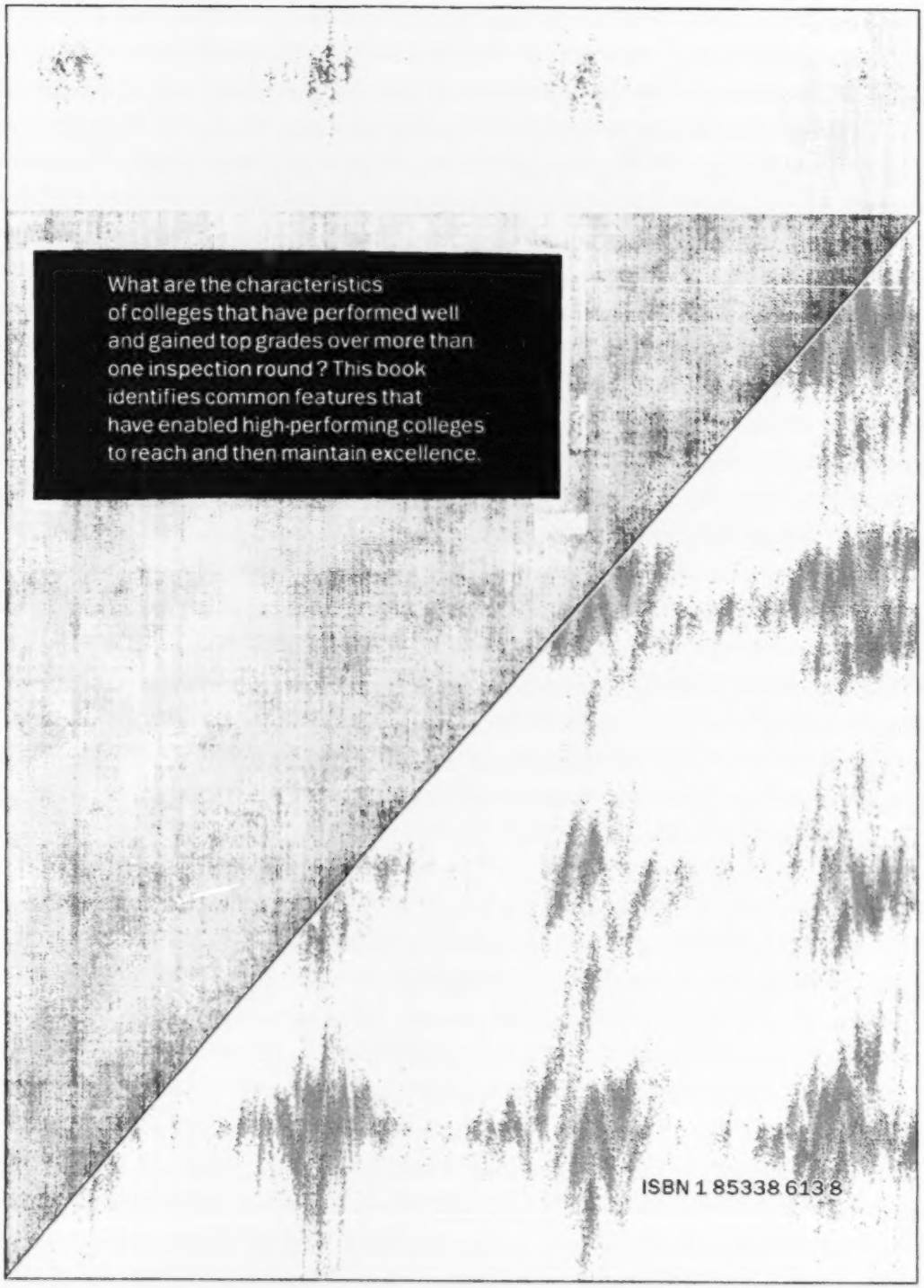
   - college improvement
   - improving teaching and learning
   - training and development for principals and senior management teams
   - the good governance programme
   - dissemination of good practice
   - achievement fund.

Initially funding was available only to FEFC-funded colleges. In 2000/01 funding is also available to providers of FEFC-funded further education other than sector colleges.

Full details are set out in FEFC Circulars 00/15 *Quality improvement, Use of the Standards Fund 2000/01* and 00/19 *Quality improvement, Standards Fund 2000/01: Non-sector colleges.*

See also the Common inspection framework (Ofsted consultation September 2000, on www.ofsted.gov.uk)

4. Working through the full assessment for the Business Excellence model, which is promoted in the UK by the British Quality Foundation, can be time consuming. The Learning and Skills Development Agency, together with the University of Northumberland at Newcastle (UNN) and the London Business School, have developed a simpler tool for education, Learning PROBE, based on the model developed by the CBI for the service sector. Learning PROBE (Promoting Business Excellence) has been trialled by a number of colleges and was launched in October 2000. A team of staff from all levels and different functional areas across the college (in effect a 'slice' group) rate the college's performance in its internal processes, customer service and results. Its performance can be compared with other colleges and external organisations, and through process benchmarking, it can identify how to improve areas of performance.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